



United States Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Water
Office of Science and Technology



Draft Strategy for Water Quality Standards and Criteria

May 2002

Why Is a Strategy for Water Quality Standards and Criteria Being Developed?

Water quality standards and criteria are the regulatory and scientific foundation of programs established under the Clean Water Act to protect the Nation's waters. As such, they are among the most critical clean water programs. They need renewed focus and priority-setting, particularly since the nature of water pollution problems and needed solutions have changed dramatically.

How Is the Strategy Being Developed?

The draft strategy is the product of a wide-ranging review of the existing water quality standards and criteria program within the context of all clean water programs. The review covered clean water goals, mandates and authorities; EPA's current strategic goals for clean water and other strategic planning efforts; major needs of the current EPA standards and criteria program and key programs linked to it including total maximum daily loads (TMDLs), National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits, and source water protection; and current trends in water quality including emerging environmental problems. The review also considered the results of more than 50 listening sessions conducted for the draft strategy with over 350 people during April-September 2001 and recent recommendations from the National Research Council, the General Accounting Office, EPA's Inspector General, and EPA's National Environmental Justice Advisory Committee.

What Does the Strategy Contain?

The draft strategy contains a vision for the future:

All waters of the United States will have water quality standards that include the highest attainable uses, combined with water quality criteria that reflect the current and evolving body of scientific information to protect those uses. Further, standards will have well-defined means for implementation through Clean Water Act programs.

Actions to achieve this vision will need to fill major program gaps, meet important needs of states and authorized tribes, establish key linkages with other programs, address new complexities, make creative use of resources, and most importantly, achieve environmental results. From an analysis of these factors and the listening session results, 28 strategic actions emerged as most important for the program to accomplish over the next seven years. These strategic actions are organized along five strategic directions:

1. Clarify program requirements where gaps and lack of clarity have led to uncertainty, inconsistency or inaction. Expanded guidance and targeted oversight will enable EPA, states, tribes and stakeholders to have the same understanding of how to apply the Clean Water Act's requirements for standards.
2. Enhance implementation guidance and integration with other programs linked to standards. Focused efforts will strengthen key linkages between standards and other programs including assessments, TMDLs, permits, drinking water protection, and protection of endangered and threatened species.
3. Strengthen and maintain the scientific foundation of water quality programs. These actions focus on developing and enhancing criteria for pollutants which cause the major impairments and threats to the nation's water quality, and continue to lead cutting-edge scientific advances in such areas as nutrient criteria, biological criteria and waterborne microbial criteria.
4. Link standards to watershed approaches at the state and local levels. These actions will support site-specific efforts to help solve water quality problems, and will strengthen ways for watershed stakeholders to understand the program, express community preferences for designated uses, and build support for control actions.
5. Build capacity and share information among EPA, states and authorized tribes. These efforts will increase interactions at key points such as triennial reviews, foster more exchanges between standards and criteria professionals and continue to build the capacity of regions, states, tribes and stakeholders to address standards and criteria issues.

The draft strategy focuses on what OST and other EPA offices need to accomplish to meet program needs of EPA, the states and authorized tribes. "Authorized tribes" means federally-recognized Indian tribes for which EPA has given approval to administer water quality standards programs. For Indian country as a whole, the strategy supplements, but does not replace, the goals and objectives for water quality standards expressed in *Protecting Public Health and Water Resources in Indian Country: A Strategy for EPA/Tribal Partnership*, EPA Office of Water, October 1998.

How Will the Strategy Be Implemented?

The Office of Science and Technology (OST) in EPA's Office of Water will work closely with other EPA programs and with states, authorized tribes, and stakeholders to implement the strategy.

What is the schedule for the strategy?

OST published the draft strategy for public review and comment on May 3, 2002. Comments received by August 16, 2002, will be considered in finalizing the strategy.

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28 Strategic Actions in the Draft Strategy for Water Quality Standards and Criteria

1. CLARIFYING PROGRAM REQUIREMENTS

a. Develop clear guidance and provide ongoing support for state and tribal programs to adopt the highest attainable designated uses.
b. Develop guidance on the recommended procedures for implementing antidegradation policies.
c. Target federal corrective actions to address key environmental problems, and streamline reviews, approvals and disapprovals of submitted standards.
d. Review and update the 1994 <i>Water Quality Standards Handbook</i> .

2. ENHANCING IMPLEMENTATION GUIDANCE AND INTEGRATION

a. Develop implementation guidance for new and existing water quality criteria where necessary, including guidance for measuring attainment and applying criteria in TMDLs and permits.
b. Develop implementation guidance on specific issues affecting the target levels in TMDLs and water quality-based effluent limits in NPDES permits.
c. Complete the national consultation with FWS and NMFS on existing water quality criteria and resolve recurrent issues concerning water quality standards and protection of endangered and threatened species.
d. Integrate drinking water, pesticides and other program needs with Clean Water Act needs when developing and revising water quality criteria.

3. STRENGTHENING AND MAINTAINING THE SCIENTIFIC FOUNDATION

a. Provide additional guidance and assistance in implementing criteria for bacteria.
b. Provide additional guidance and assistance in implementing criteria for nutrients and continue to publish additional nutrient criteria.
c. Coordinate research efforts on waterbody sedimentation and develop a criteria methodology.
d. Develop new and revised aquatic life criteria using the 1985 methodology and update important features of that methodology.
e. Provide technical guidance for implementing the 2000 methodology for human health criteria and develop new criteria for important pollutants based on that methodology.
f. Continue EPA's leadership role in advancing the development and implementation of biological criteria.
g. Complete and begin implementing the Strategy for Waterborne Microbial Disease.
h. Continually update analytical methods to enable reliable detection of pollutants at levels near the criteria values.
i. Encourage applied research that could lead to further guidelines for contaminated sediments and water quality criteria to protect wetlands and wildlife.

4. LINKING TO WATERSHED APPROACHES

a. Coordinate actions on standards and TMDLs and cross-train state, tribal, and EPA staff in the two programs.
b. Evaluate whether drinking water uses have been adopted in water quality standards for source waters where needed and take action if gaps are found.
c. Provide additional guidance and technical tools for making scientifically-valid site-specific modifications of criteria.
d. Address the issue of inter-jurisdictional differences in water quality standards on shared waters.
e. Encourage states to use watershed approaches and support early consideration of water quality standards in the watershed planning process.
f. Promote increased use of biological criteria and ecological evaluation with other criteria types to address watershed-level protection.

5. BUILDING CAPACITY AND SHARING INFORMATION

a. Obtain early EPA, FWS and NMFS involvement in state and tribal reviews of standards.
b. Sponsor meetings, workshops and electronic dialogues with stakeholders to assist in developing and implementing EPA policies and guidance.
c. Establish a clearinghouse for states, tribes and EPA to share information on policies, guidance, criteria and implementation approaches.
d. Expand Water Quality Standards Academies and other training.
e. Maintain and expand on-line services and data bases.